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ABSTRACT

Of all the language skills, writing is the most difficult challenge for language teachers because students have less experience with written expression. Stimulated by audio-visual materials throughout their lives, students are novices in the discipline of writing. Making writing an ongoing part of foreign language acquisition from the first day in class will help ensure student success. Even the first chapter of a beginning text provides enough vocabulary for telling a simple story. Early on, a case should be made for clarity and simplicity, and the contemporary German short story can be used as an example. During the second year of study, paraphrasing and summarizing readings and critiquing films can develop the writing skill as active vocabulary increases. More advanced grammar and composition makes more creative work possible. Incentives can come from writing assignments such as take-offs on soap operas, like Schwardwaldklinik, Dallas and Denver, Derrick-type Krimis, or advice columns for students. They challenge the imagination and help budding satirical talents unfold. Various classroom strategies for developing writing skills are presented. (Author/LB)

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ABSTRACT

Write Makes Might: A Case for the Neglected Skill

Of all the language skills, that of writing seems to defy one's teaching efforts most persistently. It is a constant challenge to one's endurance and imagination to develop this most exacting one among the skills. Students, after twelve years of schooling, have little experience in written expression. Born with a telephone receiver attached to the ear and instructed throughout by audio-visual materials, they are novices in the discipline of writing, even in their native language.

Making writing an ongoing part of foreign language acquisition, beginning on Day One guarantees a heavy investment in red ink and the best chances of success. Even the first chapter of any beginning text provides enough vocabulary for telling a simple story. Early on, a case should be made for clarity and simplicity, using the contemporary German short story as an example. During the second year, paraphrasing and summarizing readings and critiquing films advance the writing skill as active vocabulary increases.

On the advanced grammar and composition level, the student is ready for more creative work. While the ability to manipulate words and structures instead of being their victim should be its own reward, some additional incentives are helpful. Favorite topics are take-offs on soaps, like Schwarzwaldklinik, Dallas and Denver, Derrick-type Krimis, or advice columns for students. ("Fatale Fragen fur Fritz Frosch"). They challenge the imagination and help budding satirical talents unfold. Such writing usually begins with an enticing first sentence from the instructor, rather than a title, and the variety of responses is truly fascinating and staggering.

It is the purpose of this paper to present various strategies for developing writing skills which have been used successfully in the classroom.

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Write Makes Might: A Case for the Neglected Skill

Of all the skills, that of writing is undoubtedly the last one to excite a beginning second language student. It is only natural that a learner's first motivation stems from the desire to understand a spoken other-language and to begin communicating in it. During the first weeks, some teachers ban the use of books to concentrate on those two skills, and the initial results may produce a great sense of progress and accomplishment. It is, after all, the way we learned our owwn language, and we are living proof of its effectiveness. Moreover, children who grow up bi-and even tri-lingually have no problems with this approach. But it is an unfortunate fact of our educational system--laudable rare exceptions notwithstanding--that second language acquisition has no place in the elementary curriculum. By the time languages are offered, students have been in the learning-through-reading mode too long to be comfortable with the exclusively aural/oral one. And, unlike in a child, it does not even produce perfect pronunciation and intonation. The ability to learn by imitation and instinct is largely lost, as is the spirit of play and excitement of a child learning a secret code not everybody else can understand.

For the adult learner then, reading soon becomes a necessity for reinforcing patterns and structures, and it is at this point that writing should set in as well. Workbook excercises and dictations pave the way through repetition and variation and as an introduction to spelling. The actual writing, however, can and should be creative from the outset.

Even the first chapter of a beginning text provides enough vocabulary for telling a simple story, and enough word order examples to imitate to give it intelligible form. Lists of vocabulary and especially of idiomatic phrases are learned more easily and lastingly if used in compositions than they are by rote. In the early stages, the products generally don't make fascinating reading, and the students are often frustrated by their limitations. But it is a building process, and the progression is noticible and gratifies the writers and the reader.

In the beginning course I am currently teaching, one out of four days a week is spent on presenting and discussing "Alles Gute", the new co-production of Goethe-Institut and Inter-Nationes, not only to reinforce structures learned

through the regular text, but as an additional means of building vocabulary and introducing contemporary idiom. At the conclusion of each episode, new phrases are recited twice for repetition while they appear on the screen. And, since we are said to retain approximately 20% of what we hear but almost 50% of what we see, those and other phrases from the episode are also written on the board and copied by the students. Later in the week, a quiz calls for the recollection of these phrases to answer questions about the last episode. Compositions benefit indeed from this additional exposure.

On the intermediate level, writing can play a more varied and sigificant role. Basic structures and vocabulary should now be in place, ready to be built upon. Second year materials should include readings in literature, preferably contemporary short fiction, especially suited for summarizing and paraphrasing. Whenever a text has no satisfactory readings, I supplement it with a book of annotated short fiction. These stories also serve as ideal stylistic models since they generally consist of short, paratactic sentences and employ current language usage and many of the idioms familiar to the students or, at least, to which they can relate. In order to ensure conscientious reading and to continue the constant practice of writing, the stories are summarized, turned in, and then discussed. As in the first year, words and phrases not merely read and said but written as well have a greater chance of becoming part of the students' active vocabulary. To stimulate creativity, I usually also have them write a different ending for the stories, especially for those they consider too pessimistic, cynical or depressing. Since I use viewing of German films as a mandatory extra-curricular activity for all levels, an additional opportunity for writing offers itself. Rather than a plot summary, a critique is required which only beginners may write in English. It is usually at this point that second year students have their first meaningful encounter with the dictionary, its revelations and its pitfalls. Aside from the benefit of other-cultural discoveries, the students become familiar with vocabulary pertaining to film, not only with that of a particular picture.

The breakthrough to "real" writing comes in the third year when, at least theoretically, the students, twice exposed to the entire grammar, have a firm grasp on structure and a considerable stock of vocabulary. In a combination advanced grammar, composition and conversation course, I put heavy emphasis on the

writing component which accounts for 30 to 40% of the grade. This course is a favorite of mine, especially because of the challenge to get the students excited about writing, and to try to sustain the excitement. An important factor in making it happen, I find, is variety which depends on the instructor's repertoire of topics and ideas. Ho-hum topics produce ho-hum compositions which are also extremely boring to read. These are some of the themes that have worked for me. Students like detective stories, "Krimis", and I am continuously devising new plots and feeding them the initial few lines to stimulate their imagination. For instance, "Gut, dass ich das Auto offen gelassen habe, dachte sie, indem sie schnell einstieg und die Tür zuschlug, hier ist es nachts unheimlich. Sie blickte flüchtig in den Rückspiegel und erstarrte...", or, "Sein bester Freund und Selbstmord? Er schüttelte ungläubig den Kopf, bis er plötzlich seine eigene Situation erkannte: die Leiche mit der Pistole in der Hand sass in seinem Auto!" For each assignment, I offer three or four different plots which the students draw out of a hat, and I have yet to receive two stories that even remotely resemble each other. Another popular genre is the mini-soap opera, with openers provided such as, "So versteh mich doch, Max, natürlich liebe ich nur dich, aber Peter hat gerade die Luxusvilla meiner Schwiegereltern geerbt--wie kann ich ihn da verlassen?" or, "Lieschen, bettelte Rudi, so glaub mir doch! Das Mädchen in meinem Hotelzimmer war wirklich meine Schwester! Kann ich dafür, dass sie so toll aussieht?" Closer to home, I have made up a running advice column for students which I call "Fatale Fragen für Fritz Frosch," and the advice for the problems I pose has given me some amazing insights into what must be the realities of campus life. Here are some examples, "Lieber Fritz, es ist Mitte März, und ich habe meine Essenskarte für die Mensa schon verbraucht. Kannst du mir raten, wie ich da bis Mai überlebe? Bertha Hungertuch." Liebe B.H., kein Problem, wenn du diese zehn Punkte befolgst..."These are easy and therefore early assignments because the compositions need only consist of ten sentences. What counts is the appropriateness of the advice, tongue firmly in cheek, of course. I am not always prepared for all the responses my items elecit, as in the case of the white rabbits. "Lieber Fritz, ich weiss, man darf im Wohnheim keine Haustiere halten, aber mein süsses, weisses Kaninchen war wirklich nicht grösser als meine Faust. Hast du eine Idee, was ich jetzt mit 120 Kaninchen machen soll? Karotten-Otto." "Lieber K.O., etc. The hair (hare)-raising suggestions included sending off for a Kaninchenkochbuch (students love German compound nouns), a fur coat as a Christmas present for a friend, getting a permit for a

for starting a campus petting zoo. At the beginning of the semester, among other handouts, I give my students a list of proverbs and another of figures of speech, such as, "das hat weder Hand noch Fuss." Both kinds lend themselves not only to discussions of cultural differences and similarities, they are also good topics for short compositions. Here too, responses vary greatly, from disputing the validity of a saying to interpreting it too literally. The latter approach, carried to its last logical conclusion, I found rather unsettling in the case of "man ist , was man isst." Once or twice a semester, I have the students develop skits from sets of characters drawn out of a hat. Each group of three to five students writes a script, submits it for correction and consultation and eventually performs it before the class of critics. A popular topic has been the job interview, especially relevant to seniors. The cast for an airline steward includes a personnel manager, a frequent flyer of the opposite sex, and an unaccompanied child of the bratty sort. For a beginning psychiatrist, the head of a mental institution, a long-time keeper, and an inmate. A favorite skit features a high school senior in search of a college. It involves a cast consisting of a recruiter for a small, expensive university, the dean of students, a savvy senior and his now indigent parents. Although there is no denying that writing is exacting work, I find that students can be challenged into doing so creatively and liking it, and the instructor's encouraging comments make up for some of the red ink spilled above.

Since the ultimate goal is the perfect-in-every-conceivable-way composition, the next question is how to achieve it. In the more optimistic mode of earlier years, I painstakingly made all the corrections, confident that the writers would pounce on them eagerly and take them to heart. Only in the rarest cases--and one tends to remember those for decades--are the same mistakes <u>not</u> repeated time and again. I soon became convinced that this method, while somewhat convenient for me, was of little value to the students who should, instead, have to find and correct their own mistakes to remember them. I began to require double-spaced papers and underlined all incorrect structures and forms before returning them to the students. Only mistakes remaining after the second go-around were counted. In order to keep track of repeated mistakes, I changed to notebooks, to be used for all the compositions of the semester. This worked rather well for most students, but there were always some who did not understand the underlined problem and, though most in need, benefitted the least from this method. In a

iudicium 1989 publication, titled "Die Rolle des Schreibens im Unterricht Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Dokumentation eines Kolloquiums," I found a contribution under the same title by John F. Lalande which referred to new developments in the United States and which addressed my problem. An experiment conducted with 60 uninitiated students equally divided into a test group and a control group, had established that the latter whose mistakes were corrected by the instructor not only did not improve between their first and their last composition but actually worsened. The test group, on the other hand, showed significant improvement, with far fewer grammatical and orthographic mistakes. It is Lalande's contention that all mistakes must be noted systematically, and that there is no proof of a connection between fear of writing and the correction of all written mistakes. He recommends a three-part system, part one of which is ECCO, a code used by the instructor to identify all types of errors, such as G for gender, SV for subject-verb agreement, PP for principal parts of verbs, UN for unmöglich: no such word or construction in German, SP for spelling, etc. Part two is problem solving by the learner who undertakes self-correction of his coded composition, and part three consists of the recognition and tabulation of recurring mistakes, called EASE. The students, in order to use the system, have a code table and an EASE sheet, the latter to be filled in beginning after the second essay. It clearly shows the types of mistakes and their frequency, an easy way for students to observe their own progress. Lelande is convinced that the effectiveness of the system lies in the combination of ECCO, problem solving and EASE, and that the exclusive use of one or another produces no significant positive results. He attributes the neglect of writing to several factors, but especially to the advocacy of the "natural approach" with its stress on communicative competence, which is always understood to be oral. The other two factors are the American tendency to learn only what has practical applicability, and the new method of evaluation called proficiency. It should be noted, however, that the first wave of enthusiasm for the latter has crested and is slowly ebbing. That a lack of fervor for the writing skill is not merely an American phenomenon was revealed in an international survey. 324 teachers of German from 24 countries were asked how much importance they attributed to the development of writing skills in their instruction. 170 responded with minimal, 53 with very minimal, and 22 with none at all. This seems to be born out by my own observations at the IX. Internationale Deutschlehrertagung in Vienna last summer which was attended by German instructors from 43 countries. Among the

variety of pedagogical topics, the absence of writing was striking. In fact, the only significant contribution in that area was, "Literarische Texte lesen--literarische Texte schreiben," by Ingrid Mummert, BRD, who had also been a member of the above mentioned colloquium. Mummert advocates literary reading and creative writing as regulary activities in foreign language instruction, not to divert from but to enhance communication skills. While writing is the most complicated and difficult language activity, it is also closely related to speaking and has even been called inner or silent speaking. Both writing and speaking are productive activities, and writing, as an inner articulation positively influences the development of speaking. Hans-Jürgen Krumm, in "Schreiben als kulturbezogene Tätigkeit," cites the definition Duden offers for the written language.

It is: --in several respects more abstract than the spoken one
--independent of situation and transcending space and time
--it occurs in long, planned-out moves, i.e. in letters and replies
--it works only with visible signs

Therefore, everything the writer wants to express has to be put into words. Writing presupposes a conscious, analytical relationship to the language while at the same time promoting it. Writing, as Fritz Hermanns puts it in "Schreiben als Lernen," leaves its traces not only on paper and serves more than just language formation and I quote, "der Sprachbildung, Ausbildung, der Bildung überhaupt." He also observes that writing has a significant influence on speaking, rather than the reverse. For writing as an individual expression, he advocates Tagebuch schreiben, an activity I also find extremely useful, and one I include in all my summer programs abroad as the single most important writing project. The beneficial experience of writing it aside, the Tagebuch becomes the students' own permanent record of all the adventures and misadventures of--in many cases--a first encounter with another culture. As a last entry, I ask them to summarize all the positive as well as the negative impressions gained during their stay, and I am always gratified by their thoughtful, non-judgemental observations. I am also convinced that the production of a written record helps internalize and make more meaningful experiences that may quickly be forgotten otherwise.

Most rewarding to the writing teacher in me is the discovery of students--at home or abroad--who find themselves intrigued by their own ability to produce good writing. They write with a certain flair and devote themselves to learning style

and proper usage, to manipulate the other language instead of being intimidated by it, and who derive pleasure and satisfaction from a perfect product. In the best of all possible worlds, they would be in the majority, to prove that, indeed, "write makes might."

Quotations from: Die Rolle des Schreibens im Unterricht Deutsch als Fremdsprache
Dokumentation eines Kolloquiums
Manfred Heid, Goethe-Institut (Hrsg.)

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